

Placer County Communicable Disease Control Pertussis (whooping cough) Fact Sheet

❖ What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious infection of the lungs. It is caused by a germ that is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person.

❖ Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Although most of the reported cases occur in unvaccinated or under-vaccinated children less than five years, 50% of these are in children under one year of age. People over 10-12 years old start to lose their vaccine protection and become at risk for the infection.

❖ How is pertussis spread?

- Pertussis is primarily spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected individuals.
- Frequently, older siblings who may have the germ in their nose and throat can bring the disease home and infect an infant in the household.

❖ What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- Pertussis begins as a mild upper chest infection.
- Resembles a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough.
- Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe with attacks of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high pitched whoop.
- There is a thick, clear mucous discharge.
- These coughing attacks may recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night.
- Older people or under vaccinated children generally have milder symptoms.

❖ How soon after infection do symptoms show up?

The time from infection to symptoms can be five to 10 days but may be as long as 21 days.



Pertussis (whooping cough) Fact Sheet (continued)

❖ How long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can spread pertussis from 7 days following infection to 3 weeks after the onset of coughing attacks. If medication is given to the infected person, the ability to spread the infection is cut down to 5 days.

❖ Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

One infection can give protection for a long time.

❖ What are the complications associated with pertussis?

- Pneumonia
- Middle ear infection
- Loss of appetite, dehydration
- Seizures
- Encephalopathy (disorders of the brain)
- Apneic episodes (brief stopping of breathing)
- Death

❖ What is the vaccine for pertussis?

The vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Immunization experts suggest that DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular-pertussis) vaccine be given at two, four, six and 12-15 months of age and between four and six years of age.

❖ What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

- The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community.
- Treatment of cases with antibiotics such as erythromycin can shorten the contagious period.
- People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants until properly treated.